

Mountain Riparian Habitat



Above 5,500 feet in elevation, Utah's streams run fast and steep through the mountains. And along these streams, vegetation creates a streamside habitat called a mountain riparian habitat.



Photo Courtesy of Lynn Chamberlain

Although the streams often are rocky and the water is cold, the streams and their streamside habitats are very productive and support a diversity of life. With snakes slithering through the streamside vegetation, river otters playing on the rocks, and insects and birds flying overhead, mountain riparian areas are as important to wildlife as they are scenic to people.

Despite their importance as a wildlife habitat, the quality of Utah's mountain riparian habitats is declining. A variety of human activities have combined to threaten several important wildlife species that call Utah's mountain riparian habitats home. But the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working with several public and private partners to restore this important wildlife habitat.

Key Facts about Utah's Mountain Riparian Habitat:

Very Rare

Covering just 0.2 percent of Utah's land area, mountain riparian habitats are very rare in Utah.

Stable but Stressed

The amount of mountain riparian habitat in the state appears stable, but many of those habitats are being affected by human activities.

Plant Life

Along Utah's mountain streams are willow, cottonwood, water birch, black hawthorn and wild rose.

Animal Life

Animals that are common to Utah's mountain riparian habitats include the northern river otter, black-billed cuckoo, smooth greensnake and the rubber boa.





Northern river otter

Species on the Edge

Mountain riparian wildlife is threatened by a variety of human activities that affect their habitat. Because many riparian species have a limited distribution, disturbances to each habitat are of concern. In all, mountain riparian habitats are important to 21 species that need conservation, including the following:

Tier One—Very High Concern

Colorado River cutthroat trout, Bonneville cutthroat trout

Tier Two—High Concern

Smooth greensnake, Western toad

Tier Three—Moderate Concern

Black-billed cuckoo, northern river otter, rubber boa

Photo Courtesy of Ron Stewart

What's Threatening Utah's Mountain Riparian Habitat?

Stream straightening, or channelization—When rivers and streams are channelized, water in the stream moves much more quickly and many streamside plants and animals can't survive the new conditions.

Energy Development—Land development and other disturbances associated with extracting oil and gas and have caused habitat loss along many mountain streams.

Improper Grazing Practices—When an area is overgrazed, streamside habitats can be damaged.

Improper OHV Use—Off-highway vehicles (OHVs) can destroy riparian habitats if not operated properly on designated trails.

Invasive Plants—Non-native plants introduced to Utah are outcompeting native plants in mountain riparian habitats.

Water Development—Dams and other water developments change natural water patterns, and can reduce the total amount of water in a habitat.

Taking Action

Protecting Utah's mountain riparian habitats will require coordinated action among a variety of partners across the state.

Conservation Actions

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has identified the following key actions needed to protect mountain riparian habitats:

1. Restore degraded habitats.
2. Encourage developers to restore or permanently protect habitat when they develop riparian habitats.
3. Ensure appropriate grazing practices are implemented.
4. Enforce OHV regulations; educate OHV users about the need to appropriately operate their OHVs .
5. Increase and secure water flows in our mountain streams.
6. Where dams exist on mountain streams, release water in ways that more closely mimic natural water patterns.
7. Educate the public about the importance of our mountain riparian habitats and how we can help keep them healthy.

Conservation Partners

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working closely with the US Forest Service, Utah Farm Bureau, private landowners, the Utah Association of Conservation Districts and others to protect mountain riparian habitats.